



Our Lady of Fatima Parish
Summary Report
A Parish Conversation About Pastoral Planning
May 2008

Background

The Archdiocese of Boston established a Pastoral Planning Committee and the committee has promulgated a report. The purpose of the report is to educate the diocese on the need for preparations for the future and reasonable and efficient allocations of scarce resources. (There is a link to the planning report available on Our Lady Of Fatima's website.)

The scarce resource? Priests. One paragraph of the 14 page report gives the unvarnished picture:

“The Archdiocese of Boston is currently served by a total of 500 active priests. Of these, 38 are on health leave or unassigned, 97 in special ministry and 365 in parish ministry. Of those in parish ministry, 108 are 65 years of age or older. At a projected average net-loss rate of 25 active priests per year and a projected average of 5 newly ordained priests per year, **by 2015 there will be only 292 active priests, i.e., priests who are not retired or permanently disabled; only an estimated 212 will be available for parish ministry. This will leave approximately 10-12 priests in each of the 20 vicariates in fulltime parish work.** Not all active priests will be capable or willing to serve as pastors. It is likely that more religious communities -- as have the Marists, Oblates and Franciscans -- will be turning their leadership of parishes back to the archdiocese, owing to insufficient numbers of priests; a few new communities will likely take responsibility for some parishes. The current dependence on many senior priests to assist with liturgical life will surely continue but their numbers will begin to decrease.”

The underlying message of the report is that, faced with this challenge, there will be a need for increased collaboration among neighboring parishes. At the outset the report admits the Archdiocese currently lacks the infrastructure to sustain effective pastoral planning, that there are too few collaborative connections between neighboring parishes, and that there is a need for a strong mandate from the Archbishop to provide authority to the regional bishops to oversee pastoral planning and hold each parish accountable for the process. It is recommended in the report that good planning would involve drilling this planning process down to the vicar forane level.

Our pastor, Father Michael Bova Conti, has engaged the Parish Planning Council (“PPC”) of Our Lady of Fatima (“OLF”) to study this report, ask questions and provide advice and feedback, and to help educate the broader parish community about the resource drivers that require this necessary diocesan-wide effort.

Parish Workshop

Toward this end, Father Bova Conti held a parish workshop on the Pastoral Planning Committee report. All interested parishioners were encouraged to attend. Father asked the PPC to begin a “conversation” educating our parish family about the inevitable forces at work requiring effective multi-parish collaboration, and what can be learned from the planning committee’s report. Father also was solicitous of how the parish believes the report will impact OLF parish, and to begin a thoughtful process of identifying a couple of specific, key areas of staffing, ministry and parish life where the parish should consider working within Collaborative D (OLF, St. Julia’s - Weston, St. Anne’s and St. Zepherin’s - Wayland, and the St. Anselm community). The workshop was held at OLF on May 28, 2008.

This brief report provides a summary of the feedback, ideas and insights from the gathering of interested parishioners who received a power point presentation on the report's principal findings and then engaged in break out discussion of the report and its anticipated impact on the parish.

What did we learn about communicating the fundamentals of this report to the wider parish?

There was general consensus that there is a vital need to touch upon the issues driving the report (i.e., primarily the rapidly declining number of priests serving parishes in the diocese). There was agreement that the broader parish community is unaware of the extent of the coming challenges and the fact that the laity will be called upon to play a bigger role in the life of the church at the parish level. An interesting observation made was that many in our parish may not recognize the looming challenges because the parish is well run, with adequate resources at present and active ministries. It was noted that only when concern about closing and/or merging parishes arises that parishioners feel the call to action. This underscores both the need for educating the parish, communicating the findings of the Archdiocesan report and engaging in realistic long-range, collaborative planning.

Recommendations heard from the participants included using web-based tools for efficient and effective communications to the parish. The use of e-mail bulletins, web content on the OLF site, a monthly e-newsletter and even parish blog were all raised by most of the break out groups. This was considered important because of a shared view that a large percentage of parishioners are not aware of the basic resource challenges facing the archdiocese and the parish, and of the need to begin collaborative planning.

More traditional methods of communication and collaboration also were recommended approaches. A once-a-month from-the-pulpit address to the parish regarding these planning/collaboration needs was suggested. Alternatively, there could be a periodic section or insert in the weekly bulletin specifically dedicated to topics in this area. Another interesting idea proposed was the creation of a "cluster newsletter" that summarized the report in an easy to digest format. Several groups raised the idea of beginning meetings with representative groups or councils of other parishes in our cluster. It was also recommended that each ministry in the parish be asked to meet with their participants to discuss the document.

Impact of the Realities of Our Times

Almost all of the break out groups acknowledged that the implications of the report are that the laity are going to have to assume greater responsibility for the well being of their faith community. In this regard, there were observations from some that as Catholics we should not be content with simply going to church on Sundays. At the same time, there is perceived need for increased and active evangelization within our church to bring lapsed and inactive Catholics back into the active life of the parish. A few concepts mentioned by the participants: frequency of social and communal activities outside of Mass, including ministries, creates a strong sense of community and parish vibrancy; a need for greater involvement in the life of the parish by young Catholics and young families; encouraging broader participation in parish ministries by a wide cross-section of the parish.

Many of the workshop participants acknowledged that the reality of the declining number of priests available to the Archdiocese, and the collaborative, will have a likely impact on the number of Masses that may be available in a parish. Some scheduling limitations for funerals, and other sacramental challenges related to the shortage of priests, may have to be accepted. Another issue raised was that as the priest shortage becomes more intense and collaborative planning broadens the roles of pastors to include ministering outside boundaries of the local parish, parishes will have to learn how to cope with this phenomenon and the stresses it places on their spiritual leaders and their services.

Process and Follow Through

An important discussion point was the need for the faithful to feel that their voice is being heard, and that the leadership of the church will follow through on the collaboration planning. There was frank discussion of the challenges in this regard as a result of the management of the sexual abuse crisis and the painful remnants of the last reconfiguration initiative. And there was a strong sentiment expressed that there needs to be a sense of accountability from all pastors in this process, as well as from the leadership of the Archdiocese.

Nevertheless, there was also a sense of optimism expressed that the collaboration opportunity provides a means for each parish to begin an examination of their strengths and weaknesses, to take advantage of our communal differences, learn from each other, and to find successful ways for parishes to complement each other and create a stronger and different sense of church as the body of Christ. As one group mentioned, the sharing of resources and resulting interactions will enrich us, and the message of the Gospel, to love God and our neighbor, will help us overcome apathy and insularity in this undertaking.

Spiritual Component

More than one group stressed that the spiritual needs of our faith community not be forgotten as these resource challenges and related collaborative planning initiatives are addressed. It was suggested by several that a cluster-wide Mass be celebrated with the other collaborative parishes as a way to begin and engage the process. It was also recommended that interaction between youth groups in the cluster be promoted, as active and engaged youth ministries are considered a hallmark of a vibrant parish.